

A Labour Party View of UK Defence Policy

11:00, 17 Apr 2015

RUSI, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2ET

The Speech

It is an honour and a pleasure to be invited back to RUSI.

RUSI remains at the centre of the debate on UK defence and security and I am extremely grateful for this opportunity to address you today.

Ambitious and Realistic

A few months ago I stood here and said that on defence Labour would be ambitious and realistic. Ambitious: because I believe that to withdraw from the world is not just undesirable, but impossible, and because I believe Britain can play a positive role in the international community. My own party, the Labour Party, has a proud record in helping to secure the relative peace and prosperity that we have enjoyed since the end of the Second World War.

All the way back to the dark days of 1940, when Atlee and Greenwood, as members of the war cabinet backed Churchill in fighting on against Nazi Germany right the way through to today where Ed Miliband has backed air strikes against the murderous barbarism of ISIL in Iraq that threatens not just the region but the wider world.

And our decisions in opposition regarding the use of military force have reflected that. But let me be absolutely clear – this is not, and will not be, a non-interventionist policy but a smart interventionist policy.

And we will be Realistic: because there are no gains to be made from promising what cannot be delivered.

There is nothing patriotic about describing defence cuts as a betrayal of our national heritage in opposition only to delete entire capabilities in government.

We have to accept that the fiscal position remains difficult. The next few years will not be easy. And so a hard-headed realism is the only way through to ensuring we have ;">responsive, high-tech Armed Forces with the capability to respond to emerging interconnected threats in an unpredictable security landscape.

So as we seek permission from the British people to govern in a little under three weeks' time, it will be ambition and realism that guide our defence policy.

I also believe we have to acknowledge that the legacy of past interventions, particularly the Iraq invasion of 2003 is challenging. This is not the place to rehearse the arguments about the merits of those conflicts. But we have to accept that our Armed Forces have been shaped by over a decade of conflict and the British public have become far more sceptical about the use of military force abroad.

Before committing to military action in the future, they understandably expect the Government to ensure that any armed intervention is properly thought-through, with a clear set of well-communicated strategic objectives, and robust exit strategies in place.

Labour has learned the lessons of the past.

And our decisions in opposition regarding the use of military force has reflected that.

And let make clear at this point that if we form the next government, we will continue the fight against ISIL in Iraq.

So I am clear that our highly capable Armed Forces are vital to the UK and its interests. Military power is not an alternative to but acts as a support for political solutions.

Our Armed Forces project power on a global scale and they deter potential enemies.

Trident

Now in the last week there has been some focus on my party's commitment to the future of the UK's independent nuclear deterrent. Some of it rather below the standard I would set as Defence Secretary.

So let me be absolutely clear: we are committed to the renewal of Trident.

We are committed to the retention of a Continuous At-Sea Deterrent and we will follow the advice of experts in terms of delivering that, who say current technology means 4 boats.

Britain's independent nuclear deterrent has been the cornerstone of the UK's defence and security for over sixty years.

It was Atlee and Bevin who first saw the need for Britain to have a nuclear deterrent.

It was Wilson and Healey who took the decision to commit to the Polaris system

It was Tony Blair's government that began the process of renewing Trident.

And if elected it will be Ed Miliband's government that will commit us to Successor.

We cannot know what threats we may face in the coming forty years and that is why it is right to renew the deterrent in the next Parliament.

Keeping our country safe is the first duty of any government and the deterrent is the ultimate safeguard of that security.

At the same time, however, I want to emphasise that Labour remains determined to working with nuclear and non-nuclear states for a world without such weapons. A future Labour government will set out to lead international efforts for multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation. We will play a full role in NPT Conferences.

Context

This is a time of multiple and complex global challenges.

A far more uncertain security landscape than was envisaged in 2010 by the current government and indeed its National Security Strategy.

Countries such as Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Yemen and Libya are being torn apart by internal conflict, helping to incubate groups such as ISIL and other ideologically affiliated groups from whom we face a growing terrorist threat.

While from Vladimir Putin's Russia comes a growing hostility - with military breaches of sovereign territory - that we hoped had been consigned to Europe's brutal past.

Humanitarian crises are causing death and human misery with growing regularity and increasing scale.

While new threats emerging from new domains, like Cyber, seem to grow at an exponential pace.

Our defence and security policies need to navigate this unpredictable and changing landscape by offering certainty and stability, at a time when government spending is necessarily constrained.

And there is also a domestic context which in strategic terms may prove even more important.

Despite the comfortable victory of the No Campaign in the Scottish Referendum, questions remain.

I know I don't need to tell you what the break-up of our union - the most successful union of nations in history - would do to our position in the world. But let me also be clear a future

Labour government will not do deals with SNP over the deterrent or the defence and security of our national despite what some say.

And we also have the prospect of an EU Referendum, as soon as 2017 if the Conservatives win the election.

This will not only cause untold uncertainty in the run-up to the referendum but would threaten to tear Britain adrift from its strategic anchor and undermine the basis of so many of our global partnerships.

On so many issues that matter – security in central Europe and the Middle East – the EU is an indispensable force-multiplier for its members – including the UK.

Government Failure

In 2010 the Government trumpeted their rejection of strategic shrinkage, yet in the last five years Britain has lost influence in Europe and in the wider world.

This light-touch approach has left us globally less relevant than we were just five years ago.

I will take no lessons from the Tories on the need for a commitment to strong defences – not least given the incompetence they have displayed in recent years in managing the MOD. Aircraft carriers. Maritime Patrol Aircraft. Procurement reform.

The deletion of key capabilities have diminished us in terms of our ability to project power and our ability to defend ourselves and our interests.

Recruitment is chaotic.

And nothing sums up the Tories approach than the phrase uttered by a Cabinet Minister when told by backbenchers to commit to greater resources for the Armed Forces – “There are no votes in defence”

The Government presided over a Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) that was strategic in name only. It began by asking what could be cut instead of focusing on ensuring we have a strong, high-tech Armed Forces equipped for many emerging, interconnected threats of the 21st century.

As General Sir Rupert Smith put it, with his characteristic eloquence, when asked about SDSR 2010:

“Incoherent nonsense.”

Now Defence Minister Philip Dunne has said that he expects SDSR 2015 to be a refinement of their existing plan, not a major refresh. That means Britain risks another financially-driven SDSR resulting in an even greater strategic vacuum and widening gaps in our military capabilities, and a further erosion of Britain’s role in the world.

The Labour party emphatically reject that approach.

Labour’s approach

So as the Labour manifesto sets out, one of our first acts in government will be to conduct a wide-ranging review of Britain’s place in the world and how we can best uphold our values and the national interest.

This review commissioned by and reporting directly to the Prime Minister, will provide the backdrop to the National Security Council’s existing work.

Importantly the review would ensure that aspects of foreign policy that don’t fit neatly into a ‘security’ framework are given due weight, including for example, the importance of our relationship with Europe and our strategy for engagement with other multilateral institutions, alongside our continuing and primary commitment to NATO.

This work would take place in parallel to the Strategic Defence and Security Review and will provide its baseline.

So what will be our approach to SDSR?

Our SDSR will be strategy-led. Asking the searching questions about what threats we face and how we deal with them.

Two carriers, the regeneration of MPA, the need to refresh Army 2020 and Future Force 2020 and the upgrading of our ISTAR capability are all major issues that we will need to address. Alongside recruitment to 77 Brigade and the need for forces able to combat new forms of hybrid warfare.

And we will ensure it is funded by carrying out the SDSR alongside the Comprehensive Spending Review.

So I can announce today that we will publish a Green Paper within the first few weeks of Government that will set out the parameters of SDSR. We want a discussion that involves the public, industry, experts and former military personnel as well as existing professionals to try and build a broad consensus.

Our approach will be open and inclusive. A stark contrast with this government's rushed, cuts-led, behind closed doors approach.

In short we will look to fill the strategic vacuum we believe is at the heart of government.

We will build on the work of the previous government by treating defence and security as separate sides of the same coin because we must do all we can to prevent a latent threat becoming patent.

The lesson of history is that deterrence is the best course of action.

Realistic and Ambitious SDSR

We have to be realistic about what we can achieve through SDSR. There is a limited impact we can have on 2019-20 from here in 2015. This is of course because so much of what we seek to achieve take so long to realise.

But this does not mean we can't achieve a lot with an ambitious approach.

We can go so much further to make our partnerships work more effectively - A P5 member, a leading EU country, the second largest contributor to NATO, a founding member of the G7 and a central partner in the Commonwealth: we're the only country that can say that. We need to be confident in the role we can play, should play and will play.

Yes our relationship with the US and the other English speaking countries is strong, special even.

The Special Relationship between the US and the UK will remain the bedrock of our security posture. It is important and will remain so.

But we can be even more effective.

There is a clear need to engage with both unconventional and conventional threats.

So a Labour government will make partnership in defence more than just an aspiration.

Interoperability more than just a word.

We welcomed the Lancaster House treaties. We welcome any attempt to improve close working with France.

However when the government justified its decision to fit cats and traps to our new carriers on the grounds that it would improve joint working with the French it was simply not credible.

It is clear that this was a decision based on immature thinking and is perhaps the best indication of the rushed approach to SDSR taken by the last government.

With a realistic and ambitious approach to defence diplomacy we can build better partnerships, improve joint working and make the most of our strategic partnerships to the benefit of the UK and our allies.

NATO, as I have said, is and must remain the foundation of our defence and security partnership and we will work tirelessly to ensure its greater effectiveness. We will remain committed to the strengthening of our collective response to Russia.

But we want to build on our relationships outside the NATO alliance too. The burgeoning relationship with Japan and our deep links with Australia, New Zealand and Canada will all be a priority.

Strengthening our bi-lateral partnerships and multilateral alliances through defence diplomacy and joint working will be one of our central goals.

Peacekeeping and Conflict Prevention

The SDSR will look at whether we can make a stronger commitment to support UN peacekeeping missions.

It remains a significant weakness of today's international system that military operations mandated and financed by the UN Security Council often receive limited operational support from the most capable military powers.

Out of 105,000 uniformed personnel deployed on UN missions today, 289 were from the UK – the 51st largest contributor in the world – with almost all of these in Cyprus.

Labour will restore Britain's commitment to fragile and conflict affected states where appropriate.

Such outward-looking participation is all part of a robust defence policy that is in line with Britain's traditions, and is something Labour wishes to deepen.

Cyber

Similarly, new types of threat—such as cyber—will increasingly test the resilience of UK Critical Infrastructure Networks such as our power and energy supplies.

In the face of increasing sophistication, serious questions need to be asked about the nature of the cyber threat facing the UK.

Labour has already called on the Government to ensure that every company working with the MoD, regardless of its size or the scale of its work, signs up to a cyber-security charter.

Building on this, we will also consult on the prospect of creating a statutory requirement for all private companies to report serious cyber-attacks threatening the UK's national infrastructure.

Armed Forces & Veterans

We must always honour the sacrifices made by our Armed Forces for our country, especially in the two lengthy wars they have fought since 2001. Britain's combat role in Afghanistan may have ended, but supporting our forces, veterans and their families will remain a priority for Labour's defence policy. The military covenant is crucial and rhetoric must be made a reality in every area. We must support veterans and their families. They have done their duty - and we must do our duty to them.

I have been appalled by stories of military personnel subjected to verbal abuse, prejudice or violence simply for wearing their uniforms. That is why a future Labour Government will introduce an Armed Forces (Prevention of Discrimination) Bill in its first Queen's Speech. We will create a Veterans Register to ensure our veterans receive proper support on leaving service.

We will continue to roll out the Veteran's Interview Programme, in which companies voluntarily guarantee an interview for job-seeking ex-Forces personnel.

We will continue to support the creation of an Armed Forces credit union providing financial advice and products such as savings, loans, and mortgages tailored to the specific needs of service families.

Furthermore we will enshrine the military covenant into the constitution of the NHS.

This means, for example, that we will create a new right to talking therapies in the NHS constitution – just as people currently have to drugs and medical treatments. Over the longer-term we will set out a strategy to deliver a waiting time standards of 28 days for access to talking therapies, and we will do all we can to ensure NHS staff are trained so that mental health problems are spotted and dealt with at an early stage.

Industry

The UK Defence Industry represents one of the great success stories of our economy. At our best we are world-class: competitive, innovative, skills-rich, providing opportunity, employment and security for thousands of people.

A Labour Government will continue to support the Defence Growth Partnership. We will work to secure defence jobs across the UK, protect the supply chain and work with industry to grow Britain's defence exports. In partnership with industry we will put accountability, value for money and sustainability at the centre of defence procurement.

We recognise that major efficiencies in the MoD budget can be found through reform of the procurement process. The problematic issues of defence procurement are systemic and widespread and have become so over decades.

We will build on the independent review published by the 2011 Labour Shadow Defence team—produced in co-operation with senior figures from industry and business—by ensuring that there is longer term project management within the Department. We will also provide industry with the clarity it requires to deliver projects on time and on cost, seek clearer delivery targets for industry and the MoD, and better prioritise and factor in exports within procurement proposals. And we want to help build a higher skilled workforce that helps sustain and grown advanced manufacturing in the defence industry and beyond in this country.

We plan to work with industry to boost apprenticeships by giving employers greater ownership of skills: our 'something-for-something' deal on apprenticeships to tackle the weak school-to-work transition for young people and ensure employers can get the skills they need to succeed. We will build on existing institutions to do this: we will build on the Industrial Councils and the Industrial Partnerships, but would like to see these strengthened so that they are playing a core role in addressing the challenges facing industry such as skills.

And we will encourage universities to play a stronger role in supporting growth in their regions: We will create new Technical Degrees that are co-designed and co-delivered by universities and businesses.

Conclusion

So, to conclude, there are concerns that there is a need for a much greater emphasis on strategic thinking in the next SDSR, which a future Labour government would provide.

And we will work to relieve the pressure on our Armed Forces and their families.

I believe we can turn these things around and I am ambitious about the future of UK defence.

We have to resist those who say we can no longer play the central role we once did.

By the end of the decade we will have taken the decision to renew Trident, delivered new attack submarines and armoured vehicles and be close to the full regeneration of carrier strike.

That is still a significant military force.

We will remain a global power in all three domains.

Of course there will be difficult choices to make in the coming months and years.

But our goal must be to provide the clear-headed strategic leadership our country needs.

Filling the strategic vacuum at the heart of government left by the previous five years.

We will carefully set priorities that are both ambitious and realistic.

We will be a pragmatic but progressive Labour government if elected, proud of our internationalism and confident of our role in the world.